

# Figuring Out Jurisdictions in Denmark

Class Handout: Advanced

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## Main Jurisdictions in Denmark

### Syssel (Shire)

The *syssel* is the oldest known administrative unit in Denmark. The oldest *syssel* are on Jutland. They are too old to have genealogical value, but still have historical value and may be referenced in works on medieval Scandinavia. Also they influenced the boundaries of some of the *herreder* which are genealogically useful.

### Herred (District)

*Herreder* were administered to by the *herredsfoged* (herred bailiff). The existence of *herreder* is first documented in 1085, but the oldest ones are thought to have been founded in Viking times. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century there were 166 *herreder* in Denmark including Skåne, Slesvig, and Gotland none of which are part of Denmark today. Because *Hær* means army it is suspected they were established for military purposes such as defending the coast or manning a longship.

Later, several other units such as the *len* and the *stift* were created by combining clusters of *herreder* together. This results in the *herreder* being the government's smallest secular unit and also results in the *herreder* being the building blocks of other jurisdictions. Once they were established, they changed very little. Additionally, the *sogne* were designed to fit perfectly inside the *herreder* so each *sogn* will belong to exactly one *herred* which will never change. Because of this, including the *herred* in your place names will help increase your clarity.

As the smallest secular unit, the *herred* had several local duties and is a great place to find documentation on your ancestors. Probates for freeholders, lodgers, and others whose land was neither owned by the king or by a *gods* will be conducted here after 1793, and religious leaders (priests, clerks, schoolmasters, etc.) after 1807. Furthermore, the *herred* court records will record local lawsuits, thefts, and other relatively minor crimes. Deeds, mortgages, fire insurance lists, and the 1844 land survey will be recorded by the *herred* as well.

### Birk (Private District)

A *birk* is similar to a *herred* except it is a private court district where all or almost everybody's land is owned by one lord (either the king or a nobleman) and that lord has the right to appoint and pay the judges. A *birk* will have similar records to a *herred* so for genealogists, a *birk* isn't much different from a *herred*. For our ancestors, the difference was huge. Those who lived in a *birk* were completely at their lord's mercy.

### Sogn (Parish)

The *sogn* is headed by a *præst* (priest) and is the smallest church unit. Starting in 1645, the *sogn* had the responsibility to record the baptisms, marriages, and burials of each person in their congregation. Because of this, this is the jurisdiction you will use the most in your Danish research. Most of the *sogn* boundaries are ancient, but some *sogne* have split over time and in Copenhagen the boundaries have changed drastically as more and more people have moved to the capital.

### **Provsti (Deanery)**

The *provsti* is headed by a *provst* (deacon) and is the church jurisdiction just above the *sogn*. A cluster of *sogne* will form a *provsti* and the *provsti* and the *herreder* usually have the same boundaries. Until 1807 the probates of religious leaders (priests, clerks, schoolmasters, etc.) were recorded by the *provsti*. You will rarely use the *provsti* for anything else.

### **Stift (Diocese)**

The *stift* is headed by a *biskop* (bishop) and is the church jurisdiction above the *provsti*. A cluster of *provsti* will form a *stift* and because the *provsti* usually have the same boundaries as the *herreder*, the *stift* are also generally formed by clusters of *herreder*. Those who wished to marry someone too closely related had to get a grant from the diocese. These records can help you extend your lines sometimes, but you will rarely use them for anything else.

### **Len (Fief)**

A *len* is governed by a *lensmand* and is the secular unit above the *herred* and directly below the king. As castles were built throughout Denmark starting around 1150, *herreder* were assigned to the nearest castles so as more castles were built, these boundaries changed. However, the *len* generally fit within a *stift* and thus, if drawn on a map, would appear as sub-units of a *stift* even though the two were not connected since one was a secular unit and one was a religious unit. Each year the *lensmand* was to create an annual account comprising of finance accounts, land lists for those whose land was owned by the king, and extra taxes paid by anyone within the *len* regardless of who owned their land.

### **Amt (County)**

On 19 February 1662, the *len* were reorganized into about 50 *amter* which were governed by an *amtmand*. The *amter* had mostly the same boundaries as the *len* and the biggest difference was the *amtmand* no longer had military authority as the *lensmand* had so the motivation behind the change was weakening the old nobility rather than changing the boundaries. The *købstader* (cities) were not included in the *amter* but were instead their own jurisdictions.

4 September 1793 it was decided and on 21 June 1794 it was announced that some the existing *amter* would be combined into larger ones, however, it took 16 years to implement all the changes. For example, Maribo *amt* was not formed until 1805. Additionally there were some changes afterwards. You will use the *amt* records frequently because they recorded probates for freeholders and lodgers prior to 1793 and also recorded *lægdsruller* (military levying rolls) from 1789-1861. Because of this, a detailed list of changes is provided below:

- 14 June 1799: Skanderborg was combined with Århus *amt*, Galten *herred* is transferred from Århus to Randers *amt*, Nim *herred* is transferred from Vejle to Skanderborg (Århus) *amt*

- 1808: Roskilde *amt* was combined with Copenhagen *amt*
- 13 June 1821: Hids *herred* is transferred from Århus to Viborg *amt*
- 16 January 1822: Vrads *herred* is transferred from Ringkøbing to Skanderborg (Århus) *amt*
- 1 July 1824: Skanderborg splits off from Århus *amt* again
- 1864: Ribe *amt* is expanded with Ribe *herred* and relinquishes the Kingdom enclaves.
- 1 August 1867: Skanderborg *amt* is combined with Århus *amt* again
- 22 September 1867: Nørre Tystrup *herred* is added to Vejle *amt*, parts of Ribe *herred* are added to Ribe *Amt*
- 31 December 1867: Ærø is added to Svendborg *amt*
- 1920: Tønder, Haderslev, Åbenraa, and Sønderborg were added
- 1931: Åbenraa and Sønderborg are combined
- 1942: Skanderborg splits from Århus *amt* again
- 1948: The Farø islands leave
- 1953: Greenland becomes an *amt*
- 1970: The *amter* are dissolved

### Stiftamt (Head Amt)

The *stiftamt* can be especially confusing to those who stumble upon it. *Stift* means diocese and *amt* means county and the *stiftamt* will have records of both so what is it? The *stiftamt* is technically just any *amt* that has a see (bishop's headquarters) located in it. Ribe *amt* for example was technically a *stiftamt* instead of just an *amt*. The *stiftamtmand* was the *amtmand* assigned to a *stiftamt*. He was the secular leader within the church, he could help with administration such as tithing collecting and distribution, but he had no actual religious authority. Because of this, the *stiftamt* kept some secular and some religious records and since the *stiftamtmand* was just an *amtmand* with more prestige but little more secular power, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century appointing someone to the rank of *stiftamtmand* was a way to get political opponents out of Copenhagen.

### Amtstue (Municipal Board)

The *amtstue* was an administrative unit primarily responsible for collecting taxes. The *amtstue* typically follow the same boundaries as the *amter*, but sometimes several smaller *amter* would fall under a single *amtstue*. The *amtstue* is very important for two reasons. First probates and copyholds for anyone whose land was owned by the king will be recorded here, and after 1662 extra taxes were recorded here as well. Extra taxes are generally useful from 1660-1700.

### Lægedistrikt (Medical Distrikt)

The *lægedistrikt* generally are formed by clusters of *herreder*, but do not always follow the county boundaries. Several small islands had their own *lægedistrikter*. *Lægedistrikter* are important because the doctors recorded the names, ages, parents, and residences of those they vaccinated against smallpox. From 1801-1814 their records can supplement missing *kirkebøger* (church records).

### Gods (Estate)

The *gods* is private property often owned by a nobleman and therefore not a true jurisdiction. However, the *gods* acted as a jurisdiction in many respects and is extremely important for

identifying genealogical records for your ancestors. The owners of *godser* had the right to conduct probates of those who leased their land (this ended in 1793, 1817, or 1850 depending on the *gods*), had the right to choose who among their tenants sons had to serve in the military, had rights to inflict corporal punishment upon their tenants, and in some cases even had their own *birker*.

Because they were private property and land can be bought or sold, the *gods* do not adhere to other jurisdictional boundaries, a *gods* could own land in multiple *sogne*, *herreder*, *amter*, etc., and conversely each individual farm within a hamlet could belong to a different *gods* so neighbors could have probates in totally different places. No map exists showing the boundaries of different *godser*. Despite this, it is still possible to determine the *gods* to which your ancestor belonged. A landowner started to get privileges when he could prove he had leased out 200 *tønder hartkorn* or land within 9.37 miles of the *gods*' headquarters. Typically a peasant farm was no larger than 11 *tønder hartkorn*. Although there are no maps showing exactly which farms belonged to which *godser* there are maps showing where each *gods* was headquartered. Your ancestor most likely belonged to one of them within 9.37 miles of his residence.

## Tools for Figuring Out Jurisdictions in Denmark

### De Brune Kasser

*De Brune Kasser* is a resource created in 1976 to record all of the jurisdictions that each sogn in eastern Denmark (everything east of the Great Belt) ever belonged to as well as changes in these jurisdictions, and even boundary changes within the *sogne* themselves. This collection is divided into two volumes, the first covers the counties of Copenhagen and Frederiksberg and the second covers everything else. To access this database go to [www.sa.dk](http://www.sa.dk), in the left search bar, type in "de brune kasser" and hit enter. Or you can go directly there using this hyperlink: [https://www.sa.dk/daisy/arkivskaber\\_eller\\_arkivserie\\_liste?d=1&e=2016&c=de%20brune%20kasser](https://www.sa.dk/daisy/arkivskaber_eller_arkivserie_liste?d=1&e=2016&c=de%20brune%20kasser)

Click on the volume you want and then choose the green button that says, "Læs arkivaliet" (read the archive). This will allow you to view the book online.

The *sogne* will be in alphabetical order. Choose the one you want and read through all of the jurisdictions.

No *godser* are listed in *De Brune Kasser*, but all other jurisdictions are. This is because *godser* are not really jurisdictions.

### www.Digdag.dk

[www.Digdag.dk](http://www.Digdag.dk) is an interactive map that allows the user to select any date and see the exact boundaries of any jurisdiction they wish on that date. The site mostly works, but occasionally (especially when researching the *provsti*) does some weird things because the creators ran out of their grant before it was finished. The creators based all their information for eastern Denmark from *De Brune Kasser* and used other sources for Western Denmark.

Using the "Almindeligt Kort" (Regular Map) insert any date after 1660 where it says "Tid:" (Time) using a year-month-date number format. Each of the seven options: *Kommunal* (Municipal), *Amtslig/regional* (County / Regional), *Kirkelig* (Ecclesiastical), *Retslig* (Judicial), *Geografisk*

(Geographical), *Politivæsen* (Police), and *Øvrige* (Other) can be expanded to show various jurisdictions that fell under those categories. Check the desired one in order to view all the boundaries for those jurisdictions at that time. Click inside any one of those jurisdictions on the map and it will provide its name.

To zoom in on the map, press the + button and to zoom out press the – button. The four arrows on the side of the screen can be used to navigate the screen, north, east, south, and west.

Map is small and hard to use so it can be tempting to expand it by clicking The square with the four arrows located just below the – button. This will make the map bigger, but it impossible to click on any of the jurisdictions and interact with them so this is not recommended.

Below the expand button, is a button to change the background map. The default is a 2012 map, but there are several other options to choose from including an 1842 map and google images. If zoomed in enough, the 2012 map will even show the names of specific streets. This is helpful for determining which streets belonged to which sogne in Copenhagen.

Below “Almindeligt Kort” is another option called “Dobbelt Kort” (Double Map). Clicking on this provides a second screen which is similar to the previous one, except now you can insert two sets of jurisdictions and dates. This can be used to see exactly which jurisdictions overlapped for example which sogne belonged to which herreder, or how a jurisdictions boundaries changed over time.

**[www.danskeherregaaarde.dk/](http://www.danskeherregaaarde.dk/)**

[www.danskeherregaaarde.dk](http://www.danskeherregaaarde.dk) is a website created for those wishing to research the various *godser* in Denmark. Although its target audience is historians, it can be used by genealogists to help them guess what *god*s their ancestor's land belonged to. Zoom in on the map until, the desired sogn or by (hamlet) is identified. Dots will mark the location of various *godser*. Your ancestor's land was likely owned by one of the closest ones because land owners gained special privileges if they leased a large amount of land (200 *tønder hartkorn*) within 9.37 miles of their headquarters.

Clicking on any of the dots will provide at least the name of the *god*s and often also a list of owners, and a general history of it. You may need to refresh and go back to the home page each time you click on a new *god*s.

## **FamilySearch Wiki/Catalog**

These are quick tools that can help you determine which *god*s owned your ancestor's land. After the Genealogical Society of Utah microfilmed the *godser* probate records, missionaries went through them page by page, recording the name of the hamlet and *sogn* that each of the deceased person's lived at. This information was used create lists and enter the *godser* into the catalog. To find this information search for the *sogn* of interest and then click on “probates.” This brings up a list of all the *godser* that were known to have owned land in that *sogn*. Clicking on any one of them will provide a more precise list showing which hamlets within the *sogn* that the *god*s had land in.

In FamilySearch Wiki, each *sogn* in Denmark has its own page. All of them have a jurisdiction info box, that shows the most important jurisdictions for that area. Not all of these are complete and they may be missing information. The bottom row in this info box lists all the *godser* that are known to have owned some land in the sogn. This information was simply copied over from the catalog.

These two resources are often helpful, but are not perfect. For example, Stougård *gods* had probate records that were missing when the records were being microfilmed, but have since been discovered buried in old court documents. Because Stougård was missing at the time of microfilming, it is nowhere in the catalog and was nowhere in the wiki until this error was recently corrected there.

### **Updating the Wiki**

I am currently working on filling out the info boxes for all of the *sogne* in Denmark and adding resources such as transcribed court records, tax lists, and other obscure, but useful resources for genealogists. If you have a sogn you would like me to work on, email me at [tanner.tolman@familysearch.org](mailto:tanner.tolman@familysearch.org) and I will put yours at the top of the que.